



Newsletter

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Special Report

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SOUTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTROL

Circuit Rider Program

by Jan Easterling, Media Relations

Like the traveling ministers for whom the term was coined, the Pee Dee's Jerry Baxley, Upper Savannah's Uwe Klauck, and the Center for Waste Minimization's Bob Burgess last year became environmental "circuit riders," bringing to town hall doorsteps the message that DHEC offers help in meeting environmental regulations.

Baxley, district Drinking Water Quality manager in the Pee Dee Environmental Quality Control District, and Burgess, section manager for DHEC's Center for Waste Minimization, launched the pilot Environmental Circuit Rider project in October 2001.



Baxley and Lamar Mayor Bobby Hudson discuss ways the town can implement environmental improvements.

Klauck, who manages Upper Savannah's water programs, conducted a follow-up project, making 14 site visits in his six-county area.

The circuit rider concept is designed to help small cities and towns understand what is required of them to come into or stay in compliance with environmental regulations.

"We had not really focused on cities and towns for technical assistance, so this project allowed us to address their specific needs. And municipalities had a chance to ask questions and get technical advice in a non-regulatory setting," said Program Manager Claire Prince.



Circuit rider Klauck assists Saluda with meeting its drinking water compliance issues.

EQC launched the program with a \$50,000 one-year Regional Compliance Assistance grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Enforcement and Compliance Assurance. Modeled after a similar program created in 1996 and operated by the Indiana Association of Cities and Towns, South Carolina's program provided compliance assistance to 32 Pee Dee municipalities with populations ranging from the tiniest Tatum (69) to the metropolitan Florence (25,000) in the six Pee Dee counties.

When Prince pulled data to develop a compliance baseline, she found that many small towns were under orders for a variety of environmental violations, particularly in the drinking water and wastewater programs. This gave the circuit riders a starting point to address improvements.

Town leaders also were introduced to DHEC's Center for Waste Minimization services through Burgess'

participation. The center offers non-regulatory technical assistance to help businesses, industries and others identify waste reduction and recycling opportunities. Burgess received referrals throughout the two districts, including one in which he was able to help eliminate a pretreatment problem with an industrial discharger.

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Staff chose the Pee Dee for the pilot because of a combination of the numbers of local governments with enforcement actions, the number of small municipalities in the region, and a district staff able to take on the project.

“The concept of compliance assistance is something we’ve tried to do for years,” the Pee Dee’s Baxley said. “All districts would rather have everyone in compliance than take them to enforcement. But sometimes it’s hard for municipalities to see the problems that are coming because they’re focused on other things.”

One of Baxley’s efforts resulted in one town avoiding enforcement penalties and future water supply problems by making significant improvements to its current water system and constructing a new regional surface water treatment facility. Conversely, he made a case with a smaller community that tapping into a larger system rather than trying to run its own would be the most cost-effective solution.

“We try to give small municipalities that are struggling with compliance issues options that they might not have previously considered, such as water purchase or sewer treatment assistance. These options are normally made available through negotiations with larger area systems that are better equipped to handle such issues,” Baxley said.

Baxley and Klauck made initial contacts with local governments to introduce the circuit rider concept and to schedule visits. Local leaders received a checklist before the visit, allowing them time to review their environmental operations and identify areas of concern. Then at the appointed time, the circuit riders would take to the highway, meeting with mayors, wastewater treatment plant managers, city managers, or others the local government deemed appropriate.

“Meeting wastewater discharge permit limits and problems enforcing pretreatment permits issued to industrial and other wastewater plant users were common



Prince and Burgess plan Pee Dee visits.

problems on the wastewater side,” Prince said. “On the drinking water side, common concerns included funding for plant upgrades and repairs, water supply because of the drought, and water quality.”

Klauck found that most municipalities he contacted in his region were receptive to his offer of compliance assistance despite the fact that he might have visited them in the past as a regulator.

“They seemed to talk freely about the activities that they engage in that we might regulate. There were a lot of good questions and issues that were discussed during the meetings,” he said.

In evaluations of the program provided by the towns, the majority said they had become more aware of and concerned about environmental compliance and had been able to resolve some environmental concerns since the visit. The majority called the program exceptional and said it should be expanded statewide.

“This is a good program and should be continued next year and expanded to small businesses as well as small communities. DHEC should spend more effort in helping communities avoid problems,” one town official wrote.

An additional desire identified was for communities to network among themselves, a task that DHEC could facilitate through periodic meetings or through workshops, Prince said.

Even though the official circuit rider pilot has ended, the agency desire to promote and assist with attaining compliance remains through other programs and through district staff assistance.

“I think one of the most positive results from the visits is that we were able to remind folks that we, as an agency, have programs to help those we regulate come into compliance, particularly the assistance that is available through the Center for Waste Minimization, the Environmental Liaisons and the DHEC Web site,” Klauck said. “Enforcement actions and fines are not our primary objective.”